The Language Scholar Journal

Challenging scholarship: A thought piece

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The title of this thought piece indicates a dual meaning to *challenging scholarship*: obstacles to scholarship and contributions to scholarship. The first part of his thought piece explores a range of obstacles to scholarship: conceptual and definitional confusion; hierarchies of scholarship; the problems of impact and the influence of neoliberalism on scholarship, and the relatively low status that scholarship has in universities compared to research.

This section is followed by a consideration of what challenging contributions to scholarship might entail because of and despite the obstacles outlined earlier. I consider whether there is a professional duty to make our knowledge (and doubts) available to the wider communities to which we belong. I argue that remaining silent or abstaining from scholarship carries certain risks. We are subject to and part of multiple 'norm circles' - norm circles regulate and endorse certain increasingly standardised practices. Scholarship is a means to shape and influence the normative structures that regulate praxis. In order to exert a degree of control over our professional lives an important dimension of scholarship is reflexive critique and advocacy. As reflexive persons and professionals we aim to shorten the gap between what is and what ought to be through articulation of our values and beliefs and praxis. By making our scholarship, however fallible, public we are attempting, through dialogue to transform. In this thought piece I also outline the cognitive capital from scholarship and to argue that there is not only social capital to be gained through scholarship: there is epistemic capital and value in scholarship. I also outline the ways in which we should reconsider the pedagogical relationship with students through scholarship suggesting they have a far more active role to play than so far appears to be the case.

Introduction

In this *thought piece*, which can be qualified as speculative, analytical and, hopefully, thought provoking, I wish to explore the dual meaning of 'challenging scholarship'. Firstly, this entails mapping out the multifarious objections and obstacles to scholarship that have been forcefully articulated in a range of publications within the increasingly diverse and voluminous SoTL (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning) literature over the past thirty or so years. Secondly, having mapped out objections and obstacles, I consider what I mean and what is entailed by

scholarship that challenges, *inter alia*, practices, orthodoxy, values, epistemologies, identities, conceptions, structures, pedagogies, ideologies, and cultures which shape language education. By doing so, I am offering only an oblique response to the challenges to scholarship outlined in the first section. The decision to write in the genre of *thought piece* was taken because of the affordances it allows in terms of expressly inviting dialogue, critique, comments, refutations, and additions from readers. It is also written in this genre because this journal encourages submissions which are works and thoughts in progress, ideas that need further development through critique and dialogue and as such this piece is an open invitation to reshape some, many, if not all, of the provisional thoughts outlined here.

Challenging Scholarship: Obstacles to Scholarship

The most enduring and cited, although increasingly contested, definition of SoTL is:

> We develop a scholarship of teaching when our work as teachers becomes public, peer-reviewed and critiqued. And exchanged with members of our professional communities so they, in turn, can build on our work.
> Shulman, 2000:49.

Superficially, this definition is clear and unproblematic. It offers a clear sense that scholarship is the result, the outcome, the product of our teaching endeavours (the processes), made available publically, and used by the professional communities to which we belong. However, problems and confusions emerge when this definition is unpacked, operationalised, historicised and enacted.

The conceptual confusion around scholarship has been noted by many (most forcibly by Boshier, 2009; Franghanel et al, 2015; Servage, 2009). Perspectives on scholarship sometimes appear to amalgamate 'scholarly, exemplary or good teaching' (Boshier, 2009:2) making them difficult to distinguish. At other times scholarship appears to resemble more orthodox/traditional notions of research, or be equivalent to excellence in teaching or the application of educational theory and research to practice (Kreber and Cranton, 2000). Kreber

(2007:2) has tried to align scholarship as 'authentic practice' whilst previously (Kreber and Cranton, 2000:477) suggesting that scholarship is 'ongoing learning about teaching and the demonstration of such knowledge'. It has also been characterised as a 'shorthand for a strong commitment to teaching' (Atkinson, 2001:1219). Franghanel et al. (2015:10) have noted that scholarship has become conflated with: research-led teaching; teaching as research; dissemination; raising standards in teaching (evidencing excellence in teaching); a means to assess teaching excellence (scholarship providing the framework to assess quality), and as a teacher development tool. Boshier (2009:2) aptly captures the confusion with scholarship: 'Scholarship of teaching and learning is like a fairground mirror distorting the view irrespective of where the observer stands'.

I do not wish to labour this confusion any further simply to note three things; firstly, it is difficult not to agree with Andresen (2000) when he suggests that advocates of SoTL do not understand fully what is meant by scholarship. Secondly, this problem is compounded for those of us who come from disciplinary, educational and professional backgrounds in MFL (Modern Foreign Languages) and TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) where *scholarship* is not (yet?) part of the fabric of disciplinary discourse and concerns. Thirdly, the consequences of a lack of coherence and agreement about scholarship are *real* and not solely a matter of intellectual debate.

One of the consequences of lack of coherence regarding SoTL has been the emergence of a hierarchy of scholarship. This is, in part, due to interpretations and applications of Boyer's (1990) influential four-part scholarship model which consists of the scholarship of: discovery (research); integration (obtaining new meanings from available knowledge); application (application of knowledge to problems in theory or practice), and teaching (process of teaching). Although not Boyer's intention this model has often been disaggregated/atomised rather than considered holistically (Boshier, 2009) with the result that scholarship of discovery is considered more desirable than application (Franghanel et al, 2015). Despite Boshier's

observation above he stresses that for scholarship to count it must make 'an original contribution to knowledge. Teaching codified knowledge or rehashing other people's ideas… would not suffice' and 'creating original knowledge … distinguishes non-scholarship from scholarship' (Boshier, 2019:3-4). Creating/discovering *original knowledge* appears to put the bar so high to contributing to scholarship that it would act as a disincentive to many to begin to engage with scholarship especially if a significant motivator for engaging in scholarship is to improve the quality of educational life (a local, pragmatic and ethical concern) and for educators who engage seriously with teaching but also have other competing intellectual, work and discipline-based obligations, commitments allegiances and interests. Boshier appears to suffer from what Bourdieu called *intellectualcentricism* or *scholastic fallacy* – forgetting the scholastic conditions which have enabled him, a university professor of education, to make contributions to scholarship and erasing those conditions which shape, inhibit or circumscribe others' contributions to scholarship.

The confusion surrounding SoTL, the hierarchy of types of scholarship and the frequent focus on classroom pedagogy and problem-solving have contributed to a diminished recognition for SoTL. It is widely acknowledged (cf Bender, 2005; Chanok, 2007; Kreber, 2005) that SoTL has 'always resided in the long shadow of academic research' (Servage, 2009:29). Lurking 'at the periphery of university life and discourse' (Boshier, 2009:2) much of the discourse on SoTL continues to emphasise a lack of status, power, respect, legitimacy, value and recognition accorded to SoTL as well as hints of intellectual snobbery e.g. where SoTL is considered by many as a 'fallback route for promotion for people with patchy research records' (Boshier, 2009:1). These challenges to SOTL are further compounded in terms of promotion, recognition and reward for SoTL where senior managers and human resources departments fail to understand scholarship and where there are issues concerning evidencing SoTL through appropriate data.

At this point, it is worth pausing and considering the following questions: Why scholarship? Why now? The answer lies from two quite separate directions: it is a convergence of historical circumstances. Scholarship has been claimed as a 'movement that can transform the nature of … society toward our ideals of equity and justice… [it is] a paradigmatic change in higher education (Atkinson, 2001:1217). It has 'humanistic and progressive aspirations of improved teaching' (Servage, 2009:27) embedded in professional values of reflective practices to guide 'authentic practice' (Kreber, 2015:109). SoTL is a manifestation of a commitment to enacting professional values, lending legitimacy to teaching in universities in an attempt to put teaching on a par with research, as well as a 'rallying cry for educational reformers' (Atkinson, 2001:1219) concerned with promoting social justice and equity.

SoTL clearly has a transformative philosophy and potential but it would be naïve to view SoTL ahistorically. The rise of SoTL in North America in the 1990s also coincided with the emergence and domination of neoliberalism where the university has been and continues to be subject to an ideology of financialisation, managerialism, market competition, and entrepreneurial utility. The transformation of the university through directives, reforms and legislation to become embodiments of the free market has had a number of effects: increasing competition between universities to attract students (Newman et al. 2004); greater dependence on student fees (Servage, 2009); the 'student is expected to serve as the personification of market forces' (Furedi, 2011:3), and students are encouraged to perceive education in terms of their access and entitlement to wealth and social capital. Consequently, students tend to avoid experimentation, risk-taking, intellectual challenges, and manifest conservative attitudes towards learning in order to maximise their chances of academic success (Nixon et al., 2011). Learning has, it seems, become consumptive and entrepreneurial (Lambeir, 2006). In this climate SoTL – and teaching more generally – has become another metric to rank universities/faculties/schools/individuals and enable universities to extract greater fees from a greater number of students - often to subsidise

research (Probert, 2013:27-28). As such universities are being increasingly held to account for and judged by the quality of teaching (Kreber, 2015). It also partly accounts for shifts within SoTL from a focus on scholarship as a form of public engagement to develop and improve knowledge about teaching to a focus on *impact* (Trigwell, 2013) which must be *demonstrable* and *evidenced* (Boshier, 2009:9). Boshier (2009: 8-9) laments this shift to a preoccupation with impact – which 'reeks of performativity' - as being 'anti-intellectual' 'just in time scholarship' or knowledge with an 'expiry date' (Servage, 2009:32) and 'drags SoTL into a narrow, functionalist, applied framework' entailing 'a premature foreclosure on ideas, ambiguities and problems' and the emergence of technocratic and standardised outcomes in teaching (Hanson, 2005; Kreber, 2005; Servage, 2009) within a framework of 'best practices, benchmarks, outputs and deliverables [and] competencies' (Boshier, 2009:8).

This section has highlighted a range (but not a comprehensive list/litany) of *challenges to scholarship*: conceptual, theoretical and definitional concerns; the emergence of hierarchies of scholarship; the perceived marginalisation, recognition and low esteem of scholarship within universities, and the evolution of SoTL from a vehicle for social and educational transformation to a neoliberal metric to measure and rank the quality of teaching. Combined, these represent formidable challenges to scholarship but *despite* and *because of* these challenges I argue in the following section that this makes it all the more imperative to engage with SoTL and contribute to public discourse in various communities to envisage and enact scholarship *differently*.

Challenging Scholarship: Contributions to scholarship

> [T]he core values of professional communities revolve around the expectation
> that we do not keep secrets, whether of discovery or of grounded doubt.
> Schulman, 2000:50.

What Schulman is suggesting is that we have a duty to make public our knowledge, contributions and doubts – we 'assume the responsibility for passing on what we learn' (idem).

Engaging in scholarship is not compulsory and nor should it be as a distinction should be made between SoTL and *scholarly teaching* (which should be obligatory and has been articulated as teaching which is informed by theory, research and pedagogy). However, withdrawing from SoTL or non-engagement with SoTL carries risks. We are all subjected to (and part of) multiple *norm circles.* A norm circle is '[a]n entity with the emergent causal power to increase the dispositions to conform to the norm endorsed and enforced by the norm circle concerned' (Elder-Vass, 2012:26).

A norm circle consists of a group of people 'who are committed to endorsing and enforcing a particular norm' and they have 'the causal power to produce a tendency in individuals to follow standardised practices' (idem:22-23). A norm circle is different from a community in that its members may not be 'aware that a group as such exists and has known boundaries' but 'its member are influenced by the relations they have with each other, irrespective of how strong their consciousness is of this group as such' (idem:23). Individuals are sites of 'normative intersectionality' in which 'the differential influence of competing norms depends on the influence of power' (idem: 28-29). As language educators, whether we are aware of this or not, whether we participate or not in these circles, norm circles are *real* (ontologically real) and exert differential normative and dispositional influence over us. These circles include professional bodies, the school, students, colleagues, the disciplines that inform our knowledge and so on. Scholarship is a means to exert some influence over these norm circles, to shape the dispositions, knowledge and practices that are endorsed and enforced. Put more prosaically, by withholding contributions to scholarship we are potentially limiting our own agency, limiting our ability to influence structural change and accepting of changes and practices defined and decided by others.

Following on from this a key but neglected potential contribution to scholarship resides in reflexive critique and advocacy. Who we are is a 'matter of what we care about most and the commitments we make accordingly' (Archer, 2003: 120). Perhaps interrupted and over

extended periods of time, the self moves from *discernment* to *deliberation* then *dedication* to a course of action or project. According to Archer (idem: 105), it is imperative that we know our powers, our liabilities, our objective position in the world, our resources and our values. In short we can critique our social ontologies and can attempt to change them. If we take this idea seriously, then

> The only way that the tension between personal aspirations and social expectation can be resolved is by practical action. Self-transformation entails projects which involve self-modification but which are also expressions of social critique and quests for social transformation.
> Archer, 2003:123.

This would suggest that an important dimension of SoTL resides in: attempting to articulate our own values and principles relating to education; analysing the values and principles that dominate our contexts and professions, and through praxis and scholarship attempt to shorten the gap between what is and what ought to be. Reflexivity, then, is related to the value, desirability and transformative potential of teaching - not only about 'what works' nor only about 'efficiency' but about commitment to transform aspects of education that we find incongruent and dissonant with fundamental values and principles. This entails a scholarship of policies and established orthodoxy in language education with a view to transformation and to have a chance of succeeding in this scholarship must be made public (and by going public to acknowledge that this scholarship is *fallible*, requiring others dialogically and dialectically to contribute critically to this scholarship):

> Though our experience of knowing is individual, knowledge is not...It is through a process of communal involvement, including all the controversies, that a body of knowledge is developed. It is by participating in these communities – even when going against the mainstream – that members produce scientific knowledge.
> Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002:10).

SoTL is still typically governed and framed by notions of 'problem-solving' (Franghanel et al, 2015) and classroom-based pedagogy. Whilst perhaps inevitable that much of scholarship (including critique and advocacy discussed above) is somewhat instrumental and often geared

to practice and improvements in pedagogy. Maton provides a reminder that there is 'epistemic capital' in research and I would add scholarship:

> actors within the intellectual field engage in strategies aimed at maximising not merely resources and status but also epistemic profits, that is, better knowledge of the world.
> Maton, 2003:62.

We have cognitive interests as well as social ones and these should not be neglected in scholarship. There is a prevalent and long-standing discourse in SoTL and especially in TESOL which points to ambivalence to theory and claims of impoverished and undertheorised discourse (Kreber, 2015; McLean, 2006). This has proved to be an endemic debate in TESOL where the following quote is quite typical. 'Theory is a problem. Not everyone is keen on theory, and some teachers say they would like to have as little to do with it as possible' (Trappes-Lomax and McGrath, 1999:1).

However, Lawes offers a rebuttal: '[S]uggesting that teachers are not interested in theory is offensive and demeaning' (Lawes, 2003:27). Widdowson adding that we need practitioners who 'are not easily persuaded to join the mindless march behind the latest banner' (Widdowson, 1984:33). This last point is important if scholarship is partly conceived of in terms of epistemic capital as this carries the potential of, over time, developing expertise in a specific domain (such as assessment for example). The gaining of expertise enables greater recognition from within the professional community and discipline and, importantly, enables the language educator to exercise greater influence over language education practices. Challenging scholarship also implies a rigorous 'answering back' and critiquing research(ers) and commercially driven pedagogical innovations and imperatives – to hold them to account. On one reading of language teaching pedagogy its teleology appears to be one of incessant innovation leading to ever improving theoretical and pedagogical understanding and practices. Scholarship should be cautious of innovation as it often appears that it is *innovation* itself which is prized not the substantive content of the proposed innovation. Change is not always

good and a respectable aspect of scholarship also consists in preserving practices and 'raiding the archive' to revisit out-of-favour ideas, theories and practices.

The last substantive comment I wish to make about scholarship in this thought piece is to evoke the question of students and scholarship initially through the lens of *service*. Teaching, traditionally, has been viewed, through its professional ethics, as a *vocation*, a *calling*, a *moral imperative* and *service* to students and learning (Servage, 2009). However, this idea of service to students has been somewhat lost or conflated with more neoliberal notions of service – where service indicates monetary exchange, a commercial contractual relationship and where language educators 'deliver' a product which entails the enactment of *effective*, *efficient* pedagogies.

There are two short points I would like to make: firstly, despite the voluminous discourse on the nefarious effects of neoliberalism on education it would be impoverished to assume (and then act on this assumption) that students primarily see themselves and behave as consumers: this only offers them a very reductive identity and role and will curtail any possibility, *in eventus,* of a more meaningful educational relationship.

The second point I would like to make is to repeat a (long) observation made by Bass, (1999):

> One telling measure of how differently teaching is regarded from traditional scholarship or research within the academy is what a difference it makes to have a "problem" in one versus the other. In scholarship and research, having a "problem" is at the heart of the investigative process; it is the compound of the generative questions around which all creative and productive activity revolves. But in one's teaching, a "problem" is something you don't want to have, and if you have one, you probably want to fix it. Asking a colleague about a problem in his or her research is an invitation; asking about a problem in one's teaching would probably seem like an accusation. *Changing the status of the problem in teaching from terminal remediation to ongoing investigation is precisely what the movement for a scholarship of teaching is all about.* How might we make the problematization of teaching a matter of regular communal discourse? How might we think of teaching practice, and the evidence of student learning, as problems to be investigated, analyzed, represented, and debated?
> Bass, 1999: npng.

Bass grasps an essential aspect of scholarship: the framing of problems or puzzles we all have when teaching languages. This is where many who advocate SoTL fall short because they relegate pedagogy to 'technical' issues, remedial scholarship. A second facet of scholarship is often to speak on behalf of students, to examine them, analyse them, explain them, modify them. What is needed is a scholarship of language education which engages students, opens up dialogue and investigations that are of mutual concern and interest, that enable students to participate and with the underlying aim to:

> being open to and integrating another's horizon of meaning in such a way that one's own perspective is altered in the process. Such integration... must involve active engagement with the perspectives of others in a manner that encourages a critical re-examination of our own perspectives and attitudes.
> Martin et al 2010: 131.

This approach to students and scholarship, to return to the initial comment on service, mitigates against instrumental and transactional relationships and enables students' voices and perspectives to be fully integrated into not only in problem solving scholarship but also wider educational discussions concerning ideas, theory, values and purposes.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

In the second part of this piece I have hinted much more than stated where challenging scholarship resides. The first point I made argued that abstaining from SoTL entails abdication of agency and relinquishing the possibility of transforming the structural conditions that shape if not determine our professional lives and activities. Abstention from scholarship is also hardly likely to lead to a rebalancing of esteem and power from research to scholarship (although I have my doubts that this should be conceived in such a binary and reductive manner).

I have suggested, obliquely, that rather than a hierarchy of scholarship there are different dimensions relating to; the theoretical and conceptual, the ethical and political, the epistemic, and the pedagogical relationship. Challenging scholarship will invariably focus on one of these dimensions and what we choose to focus on will be guided by our circumstances, interests,

needs, concerns, capabilities and also our identity. SoTL should, I believe, be democratic, open to all educators (regardless of experience and status) with the freedom to pursue interests and ideas in collaboration with students, other stakeholders, and colleagues elsewhere.

Scholarship is, in a way, an invitation – a challenge - to reconsider our identity as language educators: it suggests an identity that expands into areas often occluded in the past to one that is more visible, more vocal, making contributions to professional knowledge, exerting influence, shaping practices and policies, engaging with students differently and accumulating social and epistemic capital and recognition.

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